Whose ‘wee country’?: identity politics and sport in Northern Ireland

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Whose 'wee country'?: identity politics and sport in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article responds to Hunter's (2003) call for increased attention to identity, culture, power and sport. It explores, for the first time, the lived realities of identity politics in a divided society, through interviews with 12 self-declared Irish nationalists and republicans that represented Northern Ireland. Important insights are revealed into national eligibility decisions for either Irish team, motivated mainly by 'shop window' visibility and being seen as the best of a peer group. Political and sporting nationalisms were not necessarily analogous. A significant original finding is that the lived experiences of being closer to 'the other' resulted in an overall reinforcement rather than dissolution of difference. Visual and oral 'national' symbols such as flag, and especially anthem, delineated such difference, being symbolic walls of the mind. 'Our wee country' was thus a polarised and polarising fantasy shield. The article concludes by reconsidering the role of sport as a lens through which to examine identity and its' place as part of the 'problem' and 'solution'.

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This article seeks to unravel some of the hidden crevasses of ethno-national tensions in a divided society in which the sense of collective identification is low and 'there is no ideological mortar … holding things together' (Gormley-Heenan and Aughey 2017, 5). It deals with cultural difference, especially in relation to the question of national identity as expressed through sport. In particular, it explores the lived experiences of 12 young nationalist and republican men who represented Northern Ireland (NI) in football where particular contact dilemmas occur between ethno-national groups, born of the inherently contested nature of identity. Unheeded until now, the impact of such national sports representation on their identity politics is revealed here. In order to understand and interpret these experiences, ideas are drawn from process/figurational sociology on national

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identity, and from the burgeoning work on sporting nationalism in contested societies, both of which are reviewed briefly. This is necessary in order to appreciate fully the real, imagined and symbolic roles played by a flag and anthem in NI, where the cycle of violence and relative peace, between two groups entrapped in positions of mutual fear and distrust, is taking a long time to be forgotten. First is a short overview of the divided society that is NI today.

Research context

AQ3

The status of NI is one of the most challenging of our time. Centuries of conflict led to the outbreak of 'the troubles' in the 1960s and subsequent decades of violence under direct rule from Westminster. Today, the two main groups involved in devolved government – nationalists/republicans (NRs) and unionists/loyalists (ULs) – have diametrically opposed demands. This is despite the widespread hailing of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA) 'as a blueprint for political compromise, peace and stability' (Dingley 2002, 358). In reality, ethno-sectarian attitudes remain deeply rooted in many social fields. In politics, ~~the~~ polarisation of ~~politics~~ around 'orange' (ULs) and 'green' (NRs) was reinforced in the Westminster election of June 2017. Such division is also reflected in single-identity living comprising approximately 70 per cent of the social housing sector in NI. Intergenerational socialisation occurs, almost exclusively, within community groups, reinforced by a largely segregated school system. As a result, awareness of 'us' and 'them' (in- and out-groups) is evident in children as young as three years old (Connolly and Maginn 1999). This segregation is also manifest in the physical architecture of peace walls, bypasses, locked gates and barriers that remain the norm for many (Gormley-Heenan and Byrne 2012). Political and social debate has moved slowly towards the question of accommodation: between 'British' and 'Irish', unionists and nationalists, Protestants and Catholics, these groups showing some intra-variety.

Today, NI is a divided society less dominated by violence but one in which conflict continues through the prism of a cultural war. Cultural difference is expressed mainly along ethno-religious lines because 'ethnicity is the invoking of culture in claims about identity' (Nic Craith 2003, 3). Traditional identity boundaries have intensified overall (Braniff 2016) since the outworkings of the GFA. In these lived realities, particular national habituses have developed that are irreducible to individual prejudices alone. Rather they are deeply sedimented and reproduced on a number of interlocking planes: in economic, political and social structures and in everyday social relations underwritten by symbolism and meaning. Questions relating to national identity have a particular resonance therefore: 'what

nationality am I?' and 'am I less Irish or more British, and *vice versa*, if I support or represent Northern Ireland'? find unique expression, especially given the politicised relationship between identity and sport.

Sport stands at the interface between political and civil society and is recognised as such by the United Nations (2005). In divided communities like NI, as elsewhere (e.g. Israel/Palestine, South Africa, Spain and Cyprus), sport has been a dual agent of separation and hatred and a contentious point of ethno-national contact in which imagined nations/communities are activated and become more self-evidently real in sporting competition. Much of the mainstream commentary on this issue tends to be ideologically functionalist and, certainly in the case of NI, virtually dissolves ethno-national differences in the desire to project football as a unifying force. In such commentaries, 'our wee country' is the idiom that has come to represent not only the 'country of NI' (Young 2016) but also its national football team. First Minister Arlene Foster and her DUP colleague Paul Girvan (former Minister for Communities) too have added further succour to the common use of this vernacular (e.g. Foster, in https://goo.gl/C3KUNL; https://goo.gl/0W81JK).

The habitus codes (Maguire and Poulton 1999) associated with 'our wee country' are not necessarily shared however. Rather such ideological 'patriot games' (Poulton 2004, 452) might reflect elements of the imagined charisma that ULs have of themselves and that reinforces this group's dreams still further. Individuals representing their 'countries' thus become highly visible 'patriots at play' (Maguire and Poulton 1999) who embody such processes. In NI, a narrative that is closer to the cultural and political sphere of ULs underwrites football, it being one of the ways in which the 'special charisma' (Elias [1989] 2013) or 'fantasy shield' (Maguire and Poulton 1999) of 'the Northern Irish' is kept alive. The pertinent question in this regard is whom does 'our wee country' actually represent, in real and imagined terms?

Football offers a unique medium through which to explore this troublesome question because of the complexities of its history and governance on the island of Ireland. Reflecting the traditional origins of modern sports as 'British' or 'Irish', and the politics that diffused twentieth century sports on the island, some sports are governed on an all-island (32-county) basis such as rugby union, Gaelic games and hockey, but their respective Ulster provincial bodies are eligible for dual funding through Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland. Football/soccer was the only major team sport to follow the contours of partition, having two associations (26 and 6 counties) with demarcated imagery, symbolism and anthems.

Football is 'one of the most powerful [sports] in terms of identity formation and reinforcement' (Bairner and Shirlow 1999, 152). The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) has more than 200 national member associations. Two are the Irish Football Association (IFA, Belfast,

formed in 1880) and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI, Dublin, formed in 1921). FIFA permits those players with either a dual nationality (such as those born in NI)[1] or those who acquire a new nationality to change their national team. In world football, this is not new. Alfredo di Stefano represented his nation of birth, Argentina, Colombia (though not recognised as such by FIFA) and then Spain in the 1950s and 1960s. Current footballers have similarly changed national representation, e.g. Diego Costa and Pepe (from Brazil to Spain), Lukas Podolski and Miroslav Klose (Poland to Germany), Neven Subotic (USA to Serbia), Thiago Motta (from Brazil to Italy), Jonathan de Guzman (Canada to Holland) and Aiden McGeady (from Scotland to the RoI). In this complex governance context, sportspeople from NI can represent different 'nations' in the Olympics, World Championships and the Commonwealth Games (Liston, Gregg, and Lowther 2013). As a result, the identity–sport nexus is less than clear-cut. Reflecting on a potential medal scenario in the 2016 Olympic Games, golfer Rory McIlroy said, 'I would have felt uncomfortable either way. I don't know the words to either anthem; I don't feel a connection to either flag' (https://goo.gl/z5gVFw).

In football, a disputed position exists in which a youth player might represent NI and then the RoI as an adult player, or *vice versa*. This has manifested itself, mainly in 'southern switches' (e.g. Darron Gibson, James McClean, Shane Duffy, Marc Wilson, Daniel Devine, Paul George, Liam McAlinden and Eunan O'Kane),[2] one explanatory aspect of which is identity politics. NR footballers have said of the NI national anthem (God Save Our Queen): 'Just put your head down and try to get through it … Catholic boys … just keep their heads really low so as not to make a scene but also to show that as Catholics they must be respected' (https://goo.gl/zgZB72, accessed 16 June 2016). Such players received abuse for their actions, and in the case of one youth player interviewed here, his lowered head resulted in online death threats.

Relations between the IFA and the FAI are understandably tense concerning this question of dual eligibility. In 2009, the IFA described the 'whole issue' as 'a potential "banana skin"' in which they acknowledged that 'we need to treat the problem like a mirror and ask the hard question as to why some players from Northern Ireland would rather play for the Republic of Ireland' (Boyd, cited in Hassan, McCullough, and Moreland 2009, 751). As recently as 12 March 2017, NI senior manager, Michael O'Neill, labelled the FAI as 'morally poor' in a row over the 'poaching' of Aaron McEneff (https://goo.gl/7TRILA).[3] Understanding this requires a necessary distance from the interests and values of any particular group and the avoidance of unhelpful compressions of identity politics and sport. Of central interest then is the process in which NR youth players would open up their personal and collective identities to scrutiny when selected for NI. In order to theorise such questions more adequately, next is a necessarily pithy review of ideas

drawn from process/figurational sociology on national identity, in which Liston and Moreland (2009) have already illustrated that the complexities of national identity and sport in NI are a habitus problem par excellence.

National character, habitus codes and sport

In the *Collected Works of Norbert Elias* (Elias and Scotson [1965] 2008; Elias [1987] 2010; Elias [1989] 2013), insights were provided into the embodied (and not just imagined) connections between identity and national character: how I-, we- and they-images emerged from the historical and social development patterns of 'nations'. Personality, social structure and collective conduct were connected in which 'the fortunes of the nation became sedimented, internalized and fused as part of the "second nature" – the habitus' (Maguire and Poulton 1999, 19).[4] Modern sport – defined in terms of institutionalised, competitive, physical activities to achieve external and/or internal goals – is accepted to be a primary sociocultural expression of habitus: personal and collective. International sports in particular provide 'people with a sense of difference and a way of classifying themselves and others, whether latitudinally or hierarchically' (MacClancy 1996, 2). Thus, a flag and national anthem, and reactions to them, reveal layers of the complex network of beliefs, national and emotional allegiances that operate on a daily basis.

Sport crystallises such daily moments because feelings about national symbols are widely displayed and articulated. Sporting nationalism is a material experience, embodied in social learning and in conceptions of individual people (I-images), groups of people with a shared construction of identity (we-images) and others who are regarded, and/or regard themselves, as different (they-images). In the 'Irish' context, the choice of national team is thus a potentially significant decision – personally and collectively. It is especially acute in the context of football because identity paradoxes are deeply embedded in the game in NI.

Identity paradoxes, imagery and symbolism

Historically speaking, football in NI was a tendentially UL game. NRs participated in the game,[5] but 'a distinct unionist identity' (Bairner 2001, 31) dominated nonetheless. NRs living in NI today are more likely to play and watch the game than in the past yet comparatively less is known of the realities of this lived experience, in which the imagery, symbolism and rhetoric surrounding the game, locally and nationally, continues to be associated with unionism broadly speaking.[6] For instance, most Irish league grounds are located in 'what could described as Protestant spaces and the atmosphere … is unionist and loyalist in terms of imagery, symbolism, and

rhetoric' (Bairner 2003, 525). More recently, one Irish league referee acknowledged that 'more needs to be done to "get down and dirty" at domestic level where sectarian attitudes tend to be more difficult to reach' (in Wilson 2007, 18). As ~~recently~~ as September 2017, a loyalist paramilitary threat resulted in the omission of national anthems and the removal of respective national flags at a European championship senior women's football game, held in Lurgan, between NI and the RoI.

In this context, sporting emblems play a real and symbolic role, reflecting the wider situation in NI in which 'public attachment to partisan symbols remains strong' (Brown and MacGinty 2003, 83). The national anthem (God Save Our Queen) and associated symbols (Union Flag and Ulster banner) remain staunchly ~~U~~unionist. ULs in particular attach considerable symbolic importance to these, the six-county national football team – 'our wee country' – being the only major team sport that bolsters this fantasy shield (e.g. Sugden and Bairner 1993; Bairner 2001; McGee and Bairner 2011; Bleakney and Darby 2017). 'The switch' by players from NI to the RoI is viewed by ULs as ranging from mildly disrespectful to defection at best, and from 'asylum seeking' to treachery in some cases (see, e.g., *Belfast Telegraph*, 5 June 2012). Of those NR players who have made such a 'switch', they cited a range of reasons: international caps, expediency and sporting ambition; perceived institutionalised Protestantism in the IFA; and, national affiliation (Hassan, McCullough, and Moreland 2009; McGee and Bairner 2011). Still, an unwillingness to discuss these experiences more fully and openly (Bairner 2010) has hindered our insights into the complexity of such matters. This is understandable given the death threats made to the aforementioned youth player and, previously, to Catholic Neil Lennon and his family, the latter being an NI national team player who transferred from Leicester City to Celtic FC in Glasgow in 2001.[7] In the light of this, and the expectation that the habits and habitats of football would be deeply imprinted with layered meanings, values and emotions, an interpretive research design was utilised here that incorporated a semi-structured interview tool.

Research sample and reflexivity

Twelve male interviewees were selected purposively, having represented NI as youths and some, as adults (see Table 1). All were from Belfast and its surrounds, described themselves as Catholic in cultural terms, 11 were Irish in self-defined national affiliation and had played in the Irish League. Some had experience of professional football in the UK. The sample was drawn from the lower working (9 of 12) to lower middle classes (3 of 12) (as defined by multiple deprivation indices). Ten attended Catholic-ethos schools and played Gaelic games (football and hurling). The other two attended an integrated school that promoted Gaelic games in physical education but

Table 1.

Pseudonym	Socio-economic background by MDI	School ethos	Self-defined sociopolitical identity
Conor	Middle class (MC)	Catholic	Nationalist
Paul	Working class (WC)	Catholic	Nationalist
Thomas	WC	Catholic	Republican
Joseph	WC	Catholic	Republican
Ryan	MC	Catholic	Nationalist
Daniel	MC	Catholic	Republican
Niall	WC	Catholic	Nationalist
Gerard	WC	Integrated	Northern Irish
Conall	WC	Catholic	Republican
Jude	WC	Catholic	Republican
Patrick	WC	Integrated	Nationalist
Declan	WC	Catholic	Republican

not in extra-curricular sport. Owing to the need to protect their identities, abridged biographies and pseudonyms are included here.

Table 1: interview sample

Rapport was established through the authors' familiarity with football, both having played the game to international level. This involvement served as an important access point when sensitive probing was required. Interviews lasted on average one hour each and explored their personal and cultural domains and their lived experiences of ethno-national contact in football. Having Irish as a common national habitus code, 11 of the 12 desired a united Ireland. In identity terms, they ranged on a continuum from self-declared nationalists (n = 5) to republicans (n = 6), to one who regarded himself as Northern Irish, had no interest in politics, any desire for Irish unification or a strong connection with Gaelic games. 'The north' or 'North of Ireland' was the main linguistic device of this group. The five nationalists were more open to power sharing in NI than the republican interviewees and voted for Sinn Féin, but without giving too much thought to this. Nationalists were socialised mainly in mixed communities with a Catholic majority. They displayed awareness of 'the troubles' and its impact on family members, but seemed content to consign this to history. They recognised cultural differences between themselves and ULs but did not view these as being necessarily oppositional or based on a struggle for dominance. Some nationalist players did acknowledge the existence of a political entity of NI but felt that a 32-county Irish football team would be 'good for the people of Northern Ireland'.

Republicans were 'harder' in their politics, by degrees only in some cases. They denied the legitimacy of a British presence in NI and were committed to Irish unity by the most effective means. This group exhibited a stronger emotional affiliation with Irish symbols, in part an outcome of their

geopolitical socialisation and regular exposure to highly visible flags, language and murals. Republicans had generally grown up closer to peace walls/lines[8] and displayed a more detailed understanding of Irish history. There was an evidently strong male influence in their families, some of whom had direct connection with 'the troubles' and para-militarism. All republicans aligned with Sinn Féin and were more vocal in their support for this party. For them, living together with ULs was characterised by mistrust, suspicion and a constant power struggle.

Analysis of interviews was fluid. First- and second-order coding permitted the emergence of key themes informed by sensitising concepts, cross-checked for accuracy by the researchers. A number of dilemmas emerged before, during and after the interviews. These were an expected outcome of seeking to gain a thick description of the subject matter, including the connections between the researchers' own biographies and the social world under examination. Once rapport was developed with potential interviewees, the researchers were explicit about the need to take a detour via detachment (Elias [1987] 2007) during data collection. Both reflected continually on the rational and emotional dimensions of national team representation, on their own playing and spectating experiences at Windsor Park, and the implications for habitus. Being reflexive, the researchers also held frequent reviews during data analysis and write-up stages in order to minimise the intrusion of idealised pictures, either of the interviewees or those to whom they referred. At the same time, however, they did not seek to eradicate the passion they held for understanding the identity-sport nexus. Accordingly, they practised a form of secondary involvement (Quilley and Loyal 2004). Presented next is an insight into the flexibility of players' habitus layers, their experiences of being closer to 'the other' in a tendentially Unionist national football system and the impact of this on their identity politics. For them, personal and sporting habitus planes were interlocked but not mutually exclusive.

Sporting habitus: 'if it was putting me on the map and putting my career first then I was happy enough to play' (Paul)

Described hitherto as a sporting pragmatism (Liston and Moreland 2009) and 'a peculiar mix of sporting expediency and opportunism' (Hassan 2002, 73), such themes also emerged here. Understood in terms of interlocking habitus planes, however, such pragmatism was not at all unusual. Moreover, the openly contested nature of identities, and the almost 'devotional status' of the NI football team to ULs (Bairner 2003), meant that NR interviewees had to develop particular coping strategies to remain involved. For 11 of the 12, the dream of becoming a professional player was the principal motivation. Viewed in utilitarian terms, the NI team was a springboard to

professional leagues in Scotland and England. Concurring with Paul (cited above), Joseph said, 'Obviously you don't really want to represent Northern Ireland but you have to … to further your career'. In the light of this overriding desire, the personal and social consequences of being involved in the NI team were not considered too deeply at the initial point of this decision. Neither did it appear that national eligibility choices were necessarily immutable. Instead, the powerful pull factor of 'becoming a pro' (Ryan) led to flexibility in players' we-identities and we-ideals. Framed by the opportunity for exposure, such flexibility ran deep. For instance, Thomas said 'I thought if I reject to play for theseuns [*sic*] (NI), then I've really got no chance at all because that's where all the scouts go to watch the best players and if I'm not there than I have no chance'. Many of the players referred to the metaphor of 'a shop window' that captured succinctly the commercialisation of their bodies as potential sports labour migrants.

Closely allied to this opportunity for exposure, however, was a personal ambition. Many interviewees felt 'proud' when selected for NI as it enhanced their 'I'-image as someone 'who could make it' (Ryan). Daniel concurred, 'I was just over the moon because, not that I'd got picked for Northern Ireland … it was just because out of 200 boys I was the top, maybe in the top 20'. The possible choice of RoI was no different in this regard, for either nationalists or republicans. Niall said, 'I just thought I wasn't getting on [to the NI team] as much but I could go down south'. Conversely, Patrick saw the RoI talent market as even more competitive, which led him to 'stay north'.

> We have six counties to choose from. I'm going to play for Northern Ireland. There's a possibility I might not get picked for the 26 counties, now I might, but you're taking a big risk and you're burning a bridge here where you could actually promote your own career'.

Such flexibility was challenged, however, by their subsequent experiences of more regular and ongoing involvement in NI youth teams, which foregrounded questions of identity politics and generated personal and social conflict for the players over time. Hidden in research terms until now, the interviewees experienced identity currents in football that, contrary to other assertions, reinforced rather than dissolved for them the tendential association between football and Unionism.

'Bleeding blue blood'[9]: football in a divided society

Only Niall and Gerard had what they described as a positive experience, either as spectator or as club player at Windsor Park, the national football stadium and home ground of Linfield FC, who play in the Irish league and have drawn strongly on their ties to Loyalist and anti-Catholic communities. The rest felt, negatively in tone, that the IFA and Linfield were, as Conall put

it, 'the same thing'. As a result, Windsor Park was neither a neutral nor a shared national stadium for NRs. Official signage at the stadium today confirms the connection with Linfield, while along the east boundary, entering from Donegal Road, the display of unionist symbols continues to demarcate Britishness and Ulster unionism in a very real way. Despite the 'greening' of Windsor Park, the shirts ~~worn by IFA players~~ on the field also affirm this as do spectator flags with the crowned Red Hand of Ulster.

Interviewees were psychically unable to habituate to the contentious national sporting symbols of flag and anthem. Only Gerard seemed to have developed some level of comfort with the anthem, he being less connected with 'Irishness'. More than a decade ago, the anthem was acknowledged as especially problematic, carrying with it sectarian connotations. Responses to the recommendation for a new one were varied. Showing prescience, Wilson (2005) predicted a lack of political leadership and Unionist politicians subsequently distanced themselves from the ('unnecessary') recommendation. Indeed ~~as recently as~~ January 2016, First Minister, Arlene Foster, reiterated the desire not to 'tinker with tradition' under the paradoxical guise of maintaining the depoliticisation of sport (https://goo.gl/BMWKgq). Yet, for the players interviewed here, such traditions were the very epitome of 'everything that is the complete opposite of my culture' (Jude) because 'I was always sort of brought up with a tri-colour' (Ryan). As Thomas put it, 'my goal was never to play in Windsor Park in front of a Windsor crowd, in front of Union Jacks and doing the "bouncy"'. Far from a sidebar then, ordinary national team routines and everyday habits and habitats were emotively laden markers of difference.

Eleven of the 12 observed, and felt excluded from, cliques in national teams: be they UL players and/or coaches, these divisions being most evident through shared cultural language and interests, or in Gerard's observation, between 'players from Derry and Linfield'. All described national team coaches as being Protestant and/or English. ~~Under current~~ examination elsewhere by the authors, reciprocal group images were also likely to be formed in the other direction. The tendential existence of 'blue blood' (Daniel) was evident for the interviewees in the ways in which groups conversed openly and with ease about 'the marching season' (see Cecil 1993). Even for those interviewees who displayed greater openness to UL teammates, friendships were subsequently formed within but not between these pre-existing cultural groups. Identity markers became even more pronounced because of these experiences. As Conall put it,

> It has completely made me not want to be anywhere near Northern Ireland. It has strengthened my affinity towards the Republic. It has made me want to distance myself completely from the IFA, from Northern Ireland.

Similarly, Jude said, 'I always wanted to play for the Republic, since I was a boy and like, playing for them (NI) just made me think that I shouldn't be there, that I should be playing down south'.

Unintentionally then, these experiences became a more conscious push factor towards the RoI as an eligibility choice. This push was also symptomatic of the feeling of being 'in mini-England' (Patrick): a combination of tendential UL cultural dynamics and of the increasing numbers of players born in England who were also invited/selected to play for NI. These 'English players' too sought to use the national team as a career launch pad. Consistent exposure to these discordant identity politics generated individual and social challenges for the interviewees.

Habitus dissonance

Personal and social conflict was manifest in interviewees' accounts, creating a habitus dissonance that infiltrated their conscious thoughts. This forced them to evaluate their affiliation with particular cultural symbols, their 'selves' and the consequences of their actions for their families. Names, flags, shirts and anthems took on heightened meaning as a result. Declan put this most succinctly,

> You have to remember my family were brought up in West Belfast, lived through the Troubles, suffered a lot of hurt and injustice in the Troubles at the hands of loyalists, police and the British Army so this is ingrained in their heads. Windsor Park, Northern Ireland would have been seen as the port of all these types of injustice and I was going to represent the family.

Similarly, Ryan's 'uncles didn't want me anywhere near Windsor Park. They thought it was dangerous or something because of what they went through when they were my age'. Not surprisingly, the experiences of the players affirmed a weaker attachment, if not antipathy, to the anthem than was the case for young Protestants (aged 18–24 years) (see Hargie, Somerville, and Mitchell 2015). With the exception of Gerard, interviewees were unequivocal in their assertion that the national anthem was a significant ideological barrier for current and future Catholic players. Their attempts to 'feel at home' were undermined by its' continued existence, described by Patrick as akin to being 'country-less'. He went on: 'I played against England … the national anthem was played twice and I felt like we were in mini England. I didn't feel like I was playing for a country'. Conor felt even more strongly that 'the anthem represents bigotry towards Catholic people'. A resulting personal conflict took two forms mainly.

There was internal conflict about how to respond to the anthem. As with Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe's 2016 refusal to stand for the US national anthem as a silent protest against racial injustice (Cooky 2017),

bowing or dropping of the head has evoked strong responses in NI. For instance, NI football supporters have cited 'Heads bowed like they were at a funeral' (cited in https://goo.gl/fSH2zh, accessed 22 August 2016) as a form of public shaming. Social conflict also coalesced, primarily around habitus codes. One UL national youth team captain, now a senior international player, confronted some of the players interviewed here using the lever of team ethos. He was cited by Declan as saying 'any chance of showing some respect for the anthem? … You're not respecting your team mates who recognise it as their anthem'. Other interviewees (e.g. Paul) cited ULs who 'started doing the bouncy on the (team) bus' – a song, mainly associated with Glasgow Rangers FC and, it is claimed, has references to jumping on the heads of Catholic victims – and others who were 'bitter boys saying "if you don't like it [the anthem], don't be here". Conall rationalised this using the language of war: 'that's not a teammate, that's just an enemy, that's how I look at it'. Coaches, Thomas claimed, used a similar shame lever, and 'told off … a few boys … because they weren't raising their heads and it was disrespectful'. IFA coaches, perceived to be ULs, managed the question of the national anthem differently, some choosing to instruct NR players to look forward into a spot in the crowd. Possibly a pragmatic reaction on their part, a contrary effect however was that NR players were singled out for their ethno-religious difference. Thomas interpreted this as illustrative of attempts to 'brainwash' players to 'be proud to play for Northern Ireland', the anthem being a means of cultural appropriation 'so that we all bleed blue blood'.

Players recounted other pre-match dressing room routines in which such singling out was frequent. In Conor's case, the last instruction to him by a coach before walking onto the pitch was 'don't drop your fucking head'. Some players sensed that IFA coaches were concerned for their own professional image – 'they would look bad if my head was bowed' (Ryan/Conall/Joseph/Daniel) – while others felt that dynamics of shame and disrespect were deliberately activated, being motivated by ethno-religious difference. NR players felt shocked and disheartened by coaches' interjections on these issues, thus exacerbating the pressure on them to 'do what was right'. Whether the coaches considered the impact of this on players' pre-match psychological states, and on team dynamics as a whole, is an unanswered question.

Such intra-team dynamics are not unique, however, and featured in other NI national football teams, the cultural dynamics of which have been shared privately with the authors. In such scenarios, IFA coaches have instructed NRs not to wear ethno-religious signifiers on their attire; UL players have, on occasion, added the Loyalist chant 'no surrender' during the singing of the anthem when standing beside NR players, and under the guise of 'team banter', ULs have proclaimed that 'they [Catholics] know what it's about

when they get into it. If they don't like *my* anthem, they can leave'. In the face of such sedimented views, it is not surprising that many NRs felt vulnerable towards, and fearful of, coaches and supporters' perceptions. None claimed a deliberate political intention or disrespect arising from their bowing of heads or bended knees at the anthem. IFA coaches too may not have intended their actions to fan the dynamics of stigmatisation.

Inevitably, however, in the double bind that exists between the two groups, the anthem and flag activated habitus layers for both. NRs felt 'damned if they did and damned if they didn't', in the eyes of their own and of other communities. Conor best illustrated this when he said,

> Your friends asking you are you going to bow your head or are you going to sing along to it or whatever. I actually felt a wee bit of pressure on that because I'd seen certain players bowing their heads … obviously they would have got a shit load of criticism from Protestants but the amount of praise they got from Catholics (saying) 'Oh he's a legend so-and-so'. So it was actually a hard decision.

Caught up in these powerful currents of group charisma and disgrace, they could only tack back and forth, hoping to find (inevitably varied levels of) acceptance from both communities. These dynamics also served to identify outsiders, holding them at bay, thereby preserving the integrity and purity of the fantasy shield of unionism within football. On the one hand appearing to consolidate a sense of pride for the UL players and coaches in 'their own' people and 'our wee country', national football thus enabled ethno-religious divisions to thrive by virtue of its' habitat and habits.

Conclusion

Four main themes emerged from the interviews conducted here. First, the social genesis of the national character of NRs was reflected in their individual and group identities. This confirmed a plethora of work in this area. Second, players demonstrated a flexible sporting habitus towards either Irish national team being a springboard to the professional game. In that regard, sporting and political nationalism were separated, psychically, by them. This challenges the idea that nationalism and national identity are, or have to be, necessarily the same, and is a nuanced and valuable contribution to what is known currently about the identity–sport nexus. Third, and a significant new insight: the lived experiences of being closer to 'the other' resulted in an overall reinforcement rather than dissolution of difference. This was the case for all 12 interviewees irrespective of their cultural and political backgrounds. The habitat of national team football and the habits of those involved meant that, for those interviewed here at least, the tendential

association with Unionism was reinforced. Fourth, given the identity paradoxes in football, NRs were caught in a double bind in which personal and social conflict was inevitable.

Viewed from a relatively detached perspective, this conflict was foreseeable: being symptomatic of the inharmonious equality forced upon two segregated communities in NI, which appears to have compounded further a distinctive habitus problem. Coming closer together has brought about a differing kind of resistance and relations between the two main ethno-religious groups. Ending the armed conflict has also brought more attention to culture, already embodied in physical structures like peace walls/lines that were intended as temporary measures but around 100 are now in existence. Similarly so in football, a non-violent means of asserting identities, in which the anthem and flag have become, in effect, symbolic walls of the mind.

The continued ambivalence towards the anthem and flag perpetuates the perception, on the part of NRs, that the game remains a Unionist one in the widest sense. The idiom 'our wee country' thus represents a polarised view: being the fantasy shield of ULs. The continued disowning of the question of the football anthem also remains a structural constraint to progress, thus undermining the veracity of claims that sport is effective in breaking down symbolic barriers between communities. In that regard, the claim of an inclusive shared culture in NI is perhaps desirable in its idealism, but takes credulity too far if the implication is that identity politics have been transformed *because of* the national football team. A contrary but unavoidable reality is that ethno-religious differences persist, and, in some cases, are reinforced by the dialectical struggle between British, Ulster and Irish identities in sport and beyond. This begs a series of challenging questions about the identity–sport nexus in divided societies where ethno-national conflict is to be anticipated in contact situations.

If we are to theorise more adequately the potential role of popular traditional team sports such as football in effective intergroup relations, analogous to Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, deeper insight is required into the experiences of ULs and others who choose to represent NI. What, for instance, are their experiences of identity politics? What are the implications of intergroup contact for Ulster British or Ulster Loyalists for example? Do they, like their NR counterparts, share a growing awareness of difference by virtue of this? What social, organisational, political and societal conditions might enable a more inclusive and consensual agreement about sportive symbols? Moreover, if the necessary and sufficient preconditions for effective intergroup contact were in place – incorporating equal status, intergroup co-operation, common superordinate goals, and meaningful support by social and institutional authorities – might national team players build/share a common positive emotional affiliation to a Northern Irish

consciousness, as Bairner (2010) suggests? Emotions, or affect, are a crucial mediating mechanism in the process of intergroup contact, but the generation of anxiety, personal and social conflict and threats, like those revealed here, undermines the potential of such contact situations. The greater challenge is how to facilitate a society-wide process by which changes in the balance of power between the two main groups do not become a zero-sum game: perceived by one as a catalyst for increased status and by the other as an inevitable dilution or denigration of this. Suffice to say the GFA has unintentionally reinforced this because such an approach rests on the very division it is supposed to dissolve.

Whether intergroup contact, mediated through sport, can promote a more tolerant society in NI, and in so doing affect wider societal change, is debatable. One need only recall cases involving the Basque province, Glasgow, Israeli Arabs and Tamil rebels to appreciate the significant challenges associated with the arguably idealised notion of *ImagiNation(s)* (Schulenkorf 2010), especially the promotion of contact between ethnonational groups under conditions that do not lower anxiety, promote perspective-taking or enable group salience. Viewed from this standpoint, football in NI remains a contested expression of sporting and 'national' cultures because the very idea of inclusion is politicised. The current political impasse in NI, and the outcome of the ~~recent~~ Westminster election, involving a coalition between the Conservative and Democratic Unionist parties, means that many in NI are likely to cling all the more tightly to symbols that provide them with a secure sense of identity. There is also the as yet unknowable outcome of Brexit on sports law, citizenship and labour mobility, whose effect seems to be hardening the frozen clinch that already exists between NRs and ULs, in which both are mutual hostages in a circular exchange of trustful distrust.

While it is unrealistic to expect football to be solely responsible for creating and sustaining a Northern Irish consciousness, the future actions of the IFA will be an important indicator nonetheless of the development of a shared national character in NI. 2019 will be the 50th anniversary of the erection of the first peace wall in NI: Bombay Street/Cupar Way in West Belfast, well known to our interviewees. It remains to be seen whether the IFA, with civil and political partners, is willing to acknowledge and address the symbolic walls of the mind for NRs – the flag and anthem – and, in so doing demonstrate real and lasting change leadership. There is a deeper and wider challenge, however: the two main communities continue to have differing political aspirations and attitudes towards national identity. It is thus difficult to predict with any certainty the changes that might occur in the identity–sport nexus. This is especially the case given the complex consociational character of the GFA, the subtleties of demographic change and public attitudes, and the shifting geopolitical realities associated with

Brexit. Of course, the anthem and flag are but one aspect of the material realities and inequalities of those living in NI, and this article does not wilfully seek to ignore this. Nevertheless, now that guns and bombs have been laid aside, the symbolic walls of the mind such as sporting emblems, anthems and the like must also become the subject of sustained reflective dialogue, if the potential of the GFA is to be realised.

Notes

1. The Court of Arbitration for Sport has provided a long clarification on dual eligibility in their 2010 football-related judgement (A/2071 IFA v FAI, Kearns & FIFA). This is subject to the condition that they have not played at senior level for their current association, and that they also meet one of an additional set of conditions: born in that country, parents or grandparents born in that country, two years' residency (for dual nationals) or four years' residency (for newly acquired nationality).
2. To our knowledge, fewer players have first represented the RoI (either as youths) and then declared for NI compared to *vice versa*. Alex Bruce is one example, having played for the RoI at Under 21 and 'B' levels up to 2008. His RoI international caps were in non-competitive (friendly) games. Besides Bruce, Patrick and Shane McEleney, Johnny Gorman, Gerard Doherty and Tony Kane have played for both Irish football associations at youth level.
3. Aaron McEneff's younger brother, Jordan, was also cited as having 'followed a similar path'. The Hale brothers (Rory and Ronan, playing for Aston Villa and Birmingham City respectively) also 'made the switch'.
4. An extended theoretical re-statement of the work on habitus is unnecessary here as such insights, including the conceptual socio-genesis of habitus, are readily available elsewhere (e.g. Maguire and Poulton 1999; Tuck 2003; Paulle and Van Heerikhuizen 2012).
5. At least 39 players have represented the IFA and the FAI between 1908 and 1950, a period when the two rival associations competed separately, in the British Home Championship and in the Olympics and World Cups, respectively. Ger Crossley, Gerard Doherty, Mark McKeever and Tony Shields also played for FAI teams between 1995 and 1998.
6. This is not to deny that initiatives designed to tackle sectarianism and promote equal opportunity policies in Irish league competitions have yielded some changes. The 'Sea of Green' campaign at Windsor Park, which aimed to make the national stadium more welcoming to Catholics, is claimed to have had some success and it is anticipated that the recent sponsorship deal with Electric Ireland will enable the game to be further opened to girls/women.
7. Lennon retired from international football in August 2002 before his captaincy of the NI team that played Cyprus. Lennon was the target of sectarian abuse and was not the first to receive such treatment at Windsor Park. Anton Rogan, 1980s international player, a Catholic, encountered sectarian abuse during his NI playing career for being a Celtic player as did his teammate Allen McKnight.
8. Those from a nationalist background more heavily populate interface areas (Byrne, Gormley-Heenan, and Robinson 2012).

9. The phrase 'blue blood' is usually associated with Linfield FC, a leading Protestant football club founded in 1885 and known as 'the Blues'. Linfield FC was 'hated for football-related reasons but also as a consequence of both sectarian division and intra-community rivalry' (Bairner and Shirlow 2001, 44). In a new 51-year contract, Linfield received an annual payment of approximately £200,000 per annum from the IFA in return for the day-to-day management of what is now known as 'the national stadium'.

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AQ7 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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